

A Political Man: Memories of Ranajit Guha

by Dilip Simeon

(NB: This is a reminiscence of a conversation about my memories of Ranajit Guha. I have extensively revised the transcript. The conversation with Rajarshi Adhikary took place on July 16, 2023; which coincidentally was the fifty-seventh anniversary of my first day as an undergraduate).

In 1970-71 we were students at St Stephen's College in the University of Delhi. We were attracted to the Naxalite movement, then in its infancy. I knew Ranajit da as a comrade, not an academic. I became acquainted with his scholarship later. After that I met him in 1973 in Brighton in the UK; in 1974 when he visited Delhi; and finally in Princeton in 1995, which was the last time we met.

Ranjit da came to Delhi as a research scholar around 1969. He was not teaching at the University. I had never heard of him till then. All I remember is that, we were pleased that a well-respected professor had landed in the university. He used to frequent the Delhi School of Economics; and was friendly with professors such as Mrinal Dutta Choudhury, Amartya Sen, and Amalendu Guha. He was staying in the residence vacated by Professor Tapan Roy Choudhury, who had just gone to Oxford. Both Ranajit Guha and Amalendu Guha stayed in his house. Amalendu Guha was a sympathiser of the CPI-M and he and Ranajit da were always at odds.

The Naxalbari incident had taken place in May 1967, in North Bengal. Later that year, when we read about its impact in communist circles, we were enthused with radical fervour. In February 1967, I went to Palamau in Bihar for social work in the famine-stricken districts. It was there that I was convinced of Marxist-Leninism by my friend Arvind Narayan Das. The late P. C. Joshi's son Chand Joshi, was an outspoken Marxist in Hindu College. Gradually our numbers grew, and in 1969 Arvind became the Students Union President.

We got on well with Ranajit da. He was extremely comradely and affectionate. We often made posters at his place, and he would sit on the floor and help us. He would say, 'you know, I am a little too old to get involved in street brawls, but you boys have to be prepared.' He was personally very affable and affectionate. He had little time for fools and theoretical illiterates, but he excused us as we were comrades. In 1970 some of us also began to go underground; and after a short while Ranajit Guha left the country.

Nineteen sixty-eight

St. Stephen's College electing a Naxalite president was unthinkable till then, and indicates the radical mood of the time. More than anything else, it was Vietnam's plight and heroic resistance that affected us. And 1968 was a memorable year, which saw historic events such as the Tet offensive of the NLF in February, the Prague Spring, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the May uprising in Paris, the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Prague and the Mexico Olympics, prior to which hundreds of student protestors had been killed in police firing

1968 did not just witness a student's movement, but saw an unfolding workers' and peasants' movements all over the world. It was not led by any communist party, and that's why communists do not talk much about that year. The largest ever lightning strike in history took place in France, where in two weeks, 10 million workers went on strike. Now it was not the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact mobilising to crush democratic aspirations in Eastern Europe; rather NATO was mobilising to crush the people of France. President De Gaulle took temporary refuge in Germany; after checking on the loyalty of his military commanders.

We were convinced that the world revolution was underway. We were internationalists; and were convinced that the USSR had betrayed the cause. We accepted China as the headquarters of world revolution. It is a peculiar feature of Leftist non-conformism that it leads seamlessly to a new conformism, in the form of a commanding authority. I recall discussions with student comrades in Jadavpur campus, wherein the conversation began with a question – more like a demand – 'do you accept the authority of Chairman Mao as the leader of world revolution? Then we can talk.' The upheaval of 1968 took the form of the Naxalite movement in India. Naxals were also fierce opponents of the existing communist parties – and the latter for their part played a role in attempts to crush what they saw as left adventurism. We accused them of betraying the revolution.

Ranajit da was in complete agreement with the politics of the emergent CPI (ML), which had been launched in April 1969. He encouraged us to propagate the slogan '*Armed Struggle Now!*' By that time, Charu's Bangla writings (in *Deshabrati*) began to appear in English in *Liberation*. We thought that all of it would be over by the 1970s. *Lal kile pe lal Nishan* was a popular slogan amongst comrades.

The problem with such a movement is that it seamlessly grows into a horror show. It was one thing to confront university authorities, and quite another to fight the police and landlords' musclemen in the villages. The film *Hazaro Khwaishein Aisi* (2003) was an attempt to depict the insurgent mood of that time. It depicted the radical dreams of some college students transmuting seamlessly into a horrific situation involving bloodshed. Some of our friends were killed, many were arrested. Although none of my immediate friends suffered this fate, one of our Calcutta comrades was shot during the attempted jailbreak at Alipore central jail. Many people, including students, constables, and inhabitants of *bastis* died in the violence.

Optimism and celebratory radicalism had pervaded college life. However, going 'underground' changed everything. We had to face the realities of proletarian life. I found myself sleeping on railway platforms, working in factories, on trucks, and in fields. I must say that none of us could have lived through such harsh conditions without the motivation of Maoist ideology. I am now a critic of the very phenomenon of ideology; but I have to acknowledge the fact that Maoism was a powerful moral impulse.

Student life

Delhi university campus was relatively calm. But we were very adept at writing slogans, and filled up the campus walls with fiery slogans. We performed a play named *India 69*, which drew lots of attention. It was a satire which poked fun at all mainstream political

parties; and ended with the performers singing the communist anthem, the Internationale. It was given a glowing review by Chand Joshi in The Evening News on March 5, 1970. The police were extremely concerned and maintained intelligence files on us. They visited our college campus after the play, and enquired about the author. 'Koi author toh hoga?' they asked. The truth is that each of us had contributed something to the play. We had great fun doing it. The police refused to believe this.

When we began to go underground the police grew alarmed, and began to question professors as to our whereabouts. Our parents were naturally very concerned. We put them through immense grief. Imagine your children being drawn into this terrible bloodshed. None of us finished our degrees. Only Arvind completed his MA. I left college in October 1970, in my MA final year, my last memory was Tapan Raychaudhuri teaching us economic history. We received subterranean support from the St. Stephen's College hostel. However, the entire university was certainly not engulfed in this radicalism.

Rev Daniel O' Connor, who taught in the English department wrote a book on his time in India, titled *Interesting Times in India*. The book has a whole chapter about us. He and his late wife Juliet were very friendly and affectionate, despite our bad behaviour towards teachers. I must say that a degree of liberalism was always present - but this is said with hindsight. Mr. S.C. Sarkar was the principal when I went underground.

The first phase of Naxalism lasted for about three years from 1969 till 1972. Young revolutionaries went to Midnapur and other districts of West Bengal to organise the poor peasants. But they always returned to Kolkata to recharge their emotional batteries. Universities in Bengal and Andhra became the centres of this movement. Students from some Punjab universities also joined. It reached Bihar only in the 1980s.

Many of us were arrested. Only Rabindra and me remained out of police clutches at the end of it. In my view, in the India of those days, you were never caught unless you wanted to be caught. India is an ocean of humanity. When I returned to complete my MA, I was allowed to enrol in SSC; but needed special permission from the Academic Council. After I completed my degree and began looking for teaching jobs, the Principal, Dr W. S. Rajpal encouraged me to go abroad. I can quite understand his reluctance to employ me!

"Urban Naxals"

By 1968, we had become Naxals. When Ranajit da came, he lent his intellectual weight to our campaigns, and we became friends. Achintya (Barua) recently wrote a delightful remembrance of his first acquaintance with Ranjit da in Arvind's hostel room. I have posted that on my blog. The three links below are relevant to this short remembrance:

[Achintya Barua remembers Ranajit Guha](#)
[Remembering Rabindra](#)
[In Naxalbari, forty-eight years later](#)

When we got to know him better, we used to meet in his and Professor Amalendu Guha's flat. Ranajit da used to convene meetings for us with eminent economists, to whom we would give lectures on the Indian revolution. I recall taking a map of India and pointing to the 'red bases.' It was nonsense, but an example of our youthful arrogance.

At one point in our 'underground' phase, comrade Ajoy had dropped into his house. Seeing all the volumes on his bookshelves, he reminded Ranjit da that all the theory necessary for revolution was condensed in the writings of Charu Mazumdar: had not Chairman Mao said that 'the more you read, the more foolish you become'? This was typical of our attitude to learning! Ranjit da was a scholar; and was disgusted by anti-intellectualism.

Contempt for academic scholarship was part of Maoist politics. Saroj Datta, a close associate of Charu Mazumdar had justified the wave of attacks on statues of Vidyasagar and Rammohun Roy in West Bengal. Gandhi's statues and portraits were under police protection. A Bollywood film called *Prem Pujari* on the Sino-Indian War of 1962 was denounced, and a few cinema halls burnt. In May 1997, the bust of the man who had asked for revolutionaries to behead landlords was itself beheaded in Siliguri.

My dear friend, the late Rabindra Ray (whom we affectionately called Lalloo), was the first amongst us to state explicitly that Naxalism was an urban, not a rural movement - an ironic reversal of official propaganda about 'urban Naxals'. His PhD thesis appeared as a book in 1988, titled *The Naxalites and their Ideology*. (Sumanta Banerjee's *In the Wake of Naxalbari* appeared in 1980). Rabindra also characterised Naxalism as a manifestation of nihilism: something I did not understand to begin with, but which I now see as the best way to approach the phenomenon of ideology.

I once said to comrade Achintya (Barua) that our elders, such as our mentor Professor Ajit Pal, and Ranajit da should have stopped us. We were very young, but they should have known better. Achintya corrected me and said no one pushed us into this. We were old enough to make decisions; and we did so with our eyes open. And it is certainly true that going underground transformed us, not least for a different experience of life.

After Naxalbari

The Bangladesh war and China's stance on it led me to distance myself from Naxalism. It was sparked off the disintegration of the CPI (ML). Ranajit Guha had gone back to the UK; and I never had the chance to discuss all this with him. In July 1972 my parents sent me abroad for six months, and I met Ranajit da in early 1973 in Sussex University. I recall him lamenting Charu Mazumdar's theoretical orientation: according to him, Charu's notion of organisation was deficient. For Ranajit da, Stalin's concept of the communist party was the correct theory. For me, this meeting was too soon after the events, and I was too ill-read and politically immature to gain anything from it.

In 1974, I joined the History department at Ramjas College, in the University of Delhi. In February of 1982, I was brutally attacked during an agitation on behalf of a college *karamchari* who had been wrongfully denied his salary. It is a complex story that I cannot relate here. Ranjit da wrote me an affectionate letter from Australian National University in Canberra, where he was then teaching. It was a sign of his comradeship, and I still appreciate it very much.

The only other time I had an opportunity to question him was in the USA. He visited Princeton, and I happened to be a visiting fellow there in 1994-95. Ranajit Guha's talk on May 5, 1995, was hosted by the History faculty and largely attended. He spoke about

George Orwell as a colonial apologist. Frankly, I think that Orwell was a brilliant and far-sighted intellectual, who fought for democracy during the Spanish civil war. When Ranajit da completed the talk, I remarked that May 5 was just five days beyond the twentieth anniversary of the victory of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam. I asked him to comment on American imperialism, but he responded with a comment about the exploitation of man by man. This is only an impressionistic observation, but American imperialism was not much discussed academically in America. I could be mistaken as to the reason, but he did not deal with the issue.

Thereafter we met at dinner at Professor Gyan Prakash's home. It was an occasion to revive old memories, there was no discussion. I do recall a lighter moment that evening, when he quietly complained to me about the ignorance of another guest, a Pakistani professor from the UK, who asked Ranjit da if subaltern studies was a project on military history.

The Subalterns

I am not capable of saying much about Ranajit da's academic work. It was some years later, whilst completing my MA degree, that I read *A Rule of Property for Bengal*. In 1995, after the publication of my PhD thesis on the worker's movement in Jharkhand, I sent him a copy. He replied, saying he had not read it yet as it had reached him late. You could call it a kind of subaltern history, but that is not how I viewed it. Although many members of the Subaltern Studies collective were friends of mine, I am uneasy with the rhetorical query 'Can the subaltern speak?' The question is a red herring for me. Subalterns can certainly speak, depending upon what you mean by the subaltern, and what you consider to be speech. To appoint oneself a spokesperson of the subalterns is akin to Leninists asserting their knowledge of the 'true' interests of the working class. I researched and wrote a history of the workers of Jamshedpur and the miners of Jharia as honestly as I could. But I cannot claim to 'speak' on their behalf.

Not many of Ranjit da's collaborators realised the deeper aim of this project. Having interacted with him personally during our Naxal days, I can say that it was an attempt to continue the argument for the *semi-feudal, semi-colonial nature of the contemporary Indian polity* (see his essay *Dominance without Hegemony* page 307, SS 6;). He told me this in a brief chat we had during his visit to Delhi in late 1974, when he informed me of his plan to launch Subaltern Studies. 'We will continue the struggle' was what I heard him saying. To put it plainly, it is what the Maoists had been arguing for: that the Indian polity was a dominance without hegemony. This analysis transposed the characteristics of China in the 1920's to India in the 1970's and after. Whatever his collaborators thought of these issues, Ranjit da never changed his position as far as I know. Subaltern Studies was a political project for its founder.

On the whole subaltern historians were more focussed on the peasantry. Despite some far-reaching research, aside from the work of one scholar there was hardly any research on workers' movements in the entire corpus of the edited volumes. Here is a link to my review in the International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences (2001).

[Review of Subaltern Studies \(2001\)](#)

Ranajit Guha's attack on bourgeois historiography was a critique of moderate nationalism and of Gandhi, of whom he was highly critical. Moderate nationalism had not taken up class questions, rather, it had attempted to subsume such questions within national unity. Years later when I began to teach history, I was struck by a simple paradox: why should communists have expected the national movement to implement a communist programme? Why blame someone else for your own failures?

There seemed to be a conflation between the historiography of nationalism and the actual actors of the national drama. The logical answer would have been to write a history of those who *had not* ignored the class question. Indeed, I would have expected Subaltern Studies to produce a thick tome on the history of the communist movement. However, up to the time I studied it, there was not a single piece of research on this theme. This was an intellectual failure. If you believe that class struggle was downplayed by nationalist historiography, you ought to fill that gap. Yet you have nothing to say.

What was the Communist Party's stance on communalism? In 1940 the CPI's mentor Rajni Palme Dutt referred to Gandhi as an architect of Hindu revivalism (*India Today*, Chapter 15). In October 1947 the CPI sent birthday greetings to him as a great fighter against communal hatred and communal violence. I have made a copy of their pamphlet. Such questions are worthy of research and reflection, they cannot be ignored.

Here then, are my objections. The first is the presumption of representing someone. Representing the oppressed is the favourite intellectual strategy of movements avowing Marxist-Leninism: Lenin embodied the 'true consciousness' of the proletariat; and his followers continue to do so, wherever they may be in time or place. This is an assertion, not a philosophical or historical truth. The proletariat has never been the property of any faction, leader, or thinker. So-called true consciousness is philosophically a non-starter. This term always disturbed me, especially as a labour historian.

Secondly, the criticism of existent historiography for having masked class contradictions becomes problematic when counterbalanced by the complete failure to examine the politics of those who did not mask these contradictions. If you want to criticise one school of historiography for not having studied class struggle, then you should study those people in Indian history who were very much concerned with class struggle and claimed to be leaders of the proletariat. It turns out that vast segments of the working people did not think the communists were their leaders.

After the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, Ranajit Guha was disillusioned by the communist movement. He returned to it after being inspired by Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. We were all enthused by the GPCR, but we were barely out of our teens. Ranajit had been a member of the communist movement from the 1940s. He had a better knowledge of what it meant. Yet in twenty years of subaltern research there was nothing of value on Indian communism. Subaltern Studies purported to be an internationalist current. They were publishing writing from parts of the world other than India. But only one essay in the first ten volumes dealt with Russia. It is named 'In search of a subaltern Lenin' and is more a hagiography than history. Historians ought

not to worship tradition: it adversely affects their scholarship. The subaltern school's neglect of communist movements in India and the world was a disappointment.

A political man

Ranajit Guha published some excellent books, and made brilliant contributions to the subaltern series. Then came the linguistic turn, and it became engrossed in post-modernism. The school became popular in America, where deconstruction flourished. As for what is happening to Subaltern Studies now, I cannot say.

Ranajit da passed away this year, just before his hundredth birthday. He was a staunchly political person and a great scholar. My criticisms notwithstanding, my respect and affection for him remain unshaken. Rest in peace, comrade.

Dilip Simeon

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